

22 May 2015

**Reaction of the EaP CSF Steering Committee
to the Joint Declaration of the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit**

The Steering Committee of the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, welcomes that the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga has reaffirmed the importance of democracy, rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms as the core of the Eastern Partnership. However, we are concerned that the Summit did not reflect on the growing unfavourable environment for civil society activities in EaP countries and insufficient opportunities for the civil society to contribute to reforms. We call on the EU and EaP governments to improve this situation.

We regret that the Summit declaration did not meet the expectations of the Georgian, Moldovan and Ukrainian people on their countries' right to apply for EU membership under Article 49 TEU reiterated in the conclusions of EaP Civil Society Conference.

We welcome that the EU recognises positive contribution of EaP countries in different security cooperation areas, including CSDP operations and energy security. However, we urge the EU to make more efforts on strengthening security of the EaP countries which affects the security of the Union itself.

We welcome the Summit's recognition of engaging all levels of society in turning the Eastern Partnership vision into reality. As the voice of society at large, civil society representatives should be invited to address directly heads of states and governments at future Eastern Partnership Summits.

Civil society has been an actor committed to transforming Eastern Partnership countries into democratic and prosperous states. Hence, we urge both EU and Eastern Partnership governments to further support reform-minded actors and actively involve civil society in policy making. We are concerned about simulation of reforms, lack of transparency, persistent corruption and in some cases, even state capture. We urge decision-makers to strengthen dialogue with EaP CSF National Platforms in all areas, including at the development stages of policy and programme documents, ensure access to all EU-EaP documents and provide financial support. Furthermore, rooted in various communities, civil society should be at the core of building local communication strategies on EU values and benefits of EU approximation reforms.

The EaP CSF Steering Committee regrets that the issue of political prisoners was not mentioned in the declaration. It is unacceptable that opposition and CSOs representatives are imprisoned for political reasons in the EaP countries. Human rights are universal and inalienable. We urge EU and EaP

governments to develop adequate and flexible human rights protection mechanisms, in particular in conflict regions. We also call for actions to secure the release of EaP countries' citizens taken political hostages by Russia.

We welcome the Summit's commitment to supporting media freedom and encourage EU and EaP states to proactively address propaganda. Bearing in mind that the Russian speaking population in Eastern Partnership countries, as well as in the EU member states, is vulnerable to the constant Kremlin media manipulation, which promotes fear, insecurity and aggression towards its neighbours, consistent efforts should be taken to ensure the flow of unbiased information to the citizens.

The EU and its institutions must robustly defend the Association Agreements. Any further retreat on their implementation by the EU under pressure from Russia or local oligarchs will damage the EU's credibility in the eyes of people in the Partnership countries.

We welcome the Summit's recognition of increased cooperation with all EaP countries. We support the commitment of Armenia and EU to start negotiations on the new binding document regulating bilateral relations, as well as further development of visa talks. However we expect that EU obtains guarantees from Armenia to stay on course of its cooperation commitments.

We welcome the progress in EU-Belarus relations with regard to Interim Phase of modernisation, resumption of EU-Belarus Human Rights Dialogue, progress on EU visa facilitation talks and accession to the European Higher Education Area. These processes should include active CSOs monitoring of their implementation.

EaP CSF welcomes the Summit recognition of the role and continued support for the Forum. We commit to continue coordinating joint monitoring actions, expertise input, awareness-raising and advocacy initiatives at national, regional and European level.